

Sustainable fisheries need transparency

Global fisheries have been slow to catch on to the transparency wave, but the concept is now widely accepted as a fundamental component of sustainable fisheries management. Still, many governments are not disclosing even basic information on their fisheries sector, such as revenues, catch data, stock assessments or subsidies. The Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FITI) seeks to address this problem.

By Sven Biermann

Marine fisheries have become a critical resource fulfilling the economic, food security and nutrition needs of millions of people around the world. For millennia, those who dedicated themselves to fishing – either for family consumption, recreational interest or as a commercial activity – did not need to worry about the sustainability of this natural resource. Fish stocks replenished themselves with ease. But this is no longer the case.

The global Covid-19 pandemic struck at a time when the ocean was already under increasing threats from myriad impacts, including climate change, pollution and overfishing. According to the latest report on ‘The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture’ (2020) from the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), more than 34 per cent of global fish stocks are already fished at biologically unsustainable levels – a share that has tripled in the last 40 years.

On a more positive note, the same report also states that “in general, intensively managed fisheries have seen decreases in average fishing pressure and increases in stock biomass, with some reaching biologically sustainable levels, while fisheries with less-developed management are in poor shape”. Indeed, over recent years, a growing global consciousness around the importance of ensuring sustainable fisheries has been witnessed – that is, fisheries are environmentally regenerative, economically viable and socially equitable. Unfortunately, increased understanding does not automatically translate into improved action. Around the globe, many marine fisheries are still poorly managed, and some are even fully unregulated.

Why transparency counts

Of the many interventions required to improve fisheries management and seafood sustainability, the public availability of basic, credible information is essential. This includes information like what the status of fish stocks is, how many vessels are allowed to fish, and



The National Multi-Stakeholder Groups should be composed of equal numbers of representatives from government, the business sector and civil society.

Photo: FITI

under which conditions, how much is being caught, and how much is paid for the right to fish, etc. A lack of such information affects the capacity of governments to manage fisheries efficiently and sustainably, as well as the ability for effective oversight, accountability and public dialogue.

Perhaps the moment when transparency in fisheries management started garnering greater attention was when the FAO published its annual State of the World Fisheries Report in 2010. It was the first time transparency was mentioned prominently by the FAO as being of central importance to various problems affecting marine fisheries world-wide: “Lack of basic transparency could be seen as an underlying facilitator of all the negative aspects of the global fisheries sector – IUU fishing, fleet overcapacity, overfishing, ill-directed subsidies, corruption, poor fisheries management decisions, etc. A more transparent sector would place a spotlight on such activities whenever they occur, making it harder for

perpetrators to hide behind the current veil of secrecy and requiring immediate action to be taken to correct the wrong.”

However, the scope of transparency should not be limited to only shining a spotlight on the activities of governments, or companies, in order to address issues such as illegal fishing or corruption. One relatively underappreciated value stemming from improved government transparency is an increase in the visibility of the entire fisheries sector, including actors who are often ignored or neglected. This is particularly relevant for specific fisheries sub-sectors (e.g. artisanal fishing) or certain groups (e.g. women), both of which play a vital role in ensuring people’s livelihoods, food security and culture, but are nevertheless often marginalised or undervalued in public debates and policy-making. The persistent lack of such information will likely be emphasised in 2022, designated by the UN General Assembly as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (see also article on pages 10–11).

Yet even today, in the age of information, there's a lot of doubt and even secrecy about what's happening in global fisheries. Too few governments are disclosing information on their fisheries sectors, ranging from information on laws, permits, fishing agreements and stock assessments, to financial contributions, catch data and subsidies. Likewise, not enough companies are reliably reporting on catch volumes and fishing practices. Furthermore, data that is publicly available is too often incomplete, old, unverified and difficult to understand for the general public.

How do we know whether the sector is managed in a sustainable way?

The Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI) was created to address this problem on a global scale. It is a voluntary initiative that promotes transparency and collaboration in marine fisheries management. At the heart of the initiative is the FiTI Standard, the only global framework that defines what information on fisheries should be published online by public authorities. The FiTI Standard was developed over two years (2015–2017) in a global multi-stakeholder endeavour, involving representatives from governments, industrial fishing companies, artisanal fishing associations, civil society organisations and intergovernmental organisations, such as the World Bank, the European Commission, the African Development Bank and the FAO. The FiTI Standard covers twelve thematic areas of fisheries management (see Box).

In addition to defining for the first time precisely what transparency in fisheries management actually means, the FiTI is anchored on several core principles, such as:

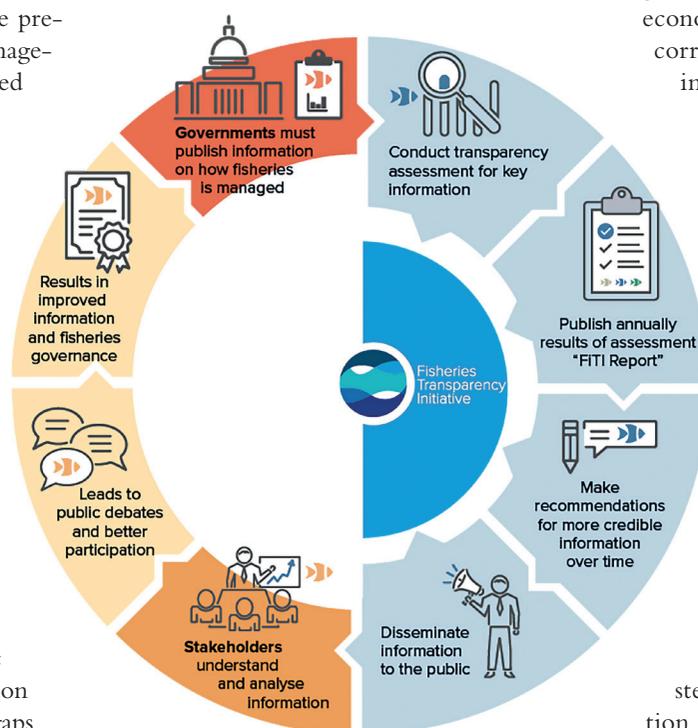
- Transparency needs trust to be effective. Information has to be seen as fair, unbiased and not serving a certain political agenda or business interest. This is why the FiTI is set up as a multi-stakeholder partnership, where representatives from governments, business and civil society work together.
- Transparency is a transformative journey. The FiTI does not expect all countries to have complete data for each of the 12 areas from the beginning. Instead, public authorities must disclose the information they have, and, where important gaps

exist, they must demonstrate improvements over time. As such, any country can implement the FiTI.

- Transparency has two sides, like a coin. The impact of the FiTI does not only lie in increasing the public availability of government information (visibility). It is equally important to ensure that such information allows others to draw reliable conclusions from it (comprehensibility).

Initial notable examples from Africa

While fisheries have been slow to catch on to the transparency wave, notable progress has been achieved over the last years. For example, Seychelles and Mauritania have become the first two countries to provide so-called FiTI Reports, outlining what fisheries information has been collated by national authorities, and whether this information is easily accessible to the wider public and seen as complete. Both reports have resulted in a range of previously unpublished information being made publicly available by national authorities for the very first time. The two reports were vetted by their National Multi-Stakeholder Group (NSMG) to ensure they can be seen as credible and trustworthy. Both groups – composed of equal numbers of representatives from government, the business sector and civil society – also formulated clear recommendations to progressively enhance transparency in their fisheries sectors over time.



Thematic areas of the FiTI standard

# 1	Fisheries laws, regulations and official policy documents
# 2	Fisheries tenure arrangements
# 3	Foreign fishing access agreements
# 4	The state of the fisheries resources
# 5	Large-scale fisheries
# 6	Small-scale fisheries
# 7	Post-harvest sector and fish trade
# 8	Fisheries law enforcement
# 9	Labour standards
# 10	Fisheries subsidies
# 11	Official development assistance
# 12	Beneficial ownership

Senegal, Cabo Verde and, very recently, Madagascar have all made public commitments to increase the level of transparency in their fisheries sectors through the FiTI. The FiTI International Secretariat, the initiative's executive body – which relocated its operations from Germany to Seychelles in 2019 – is also working with stakeholders in several other countries, such as Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, São Tomé and Príncipe, Comoros and Bangladesh.

However, in order to turn these first notable examples into a global norm, additional issues need to be addressed, two of which are outlined here. Firstly, traditional 'good governance' arguments alone may not emphasise the importance (and political priority) that needs to be given to transparency to strengthen sustainable marine fisheries. This is particularly relevant in times when many governments are focusing on post-Covid-19 economic recovery. In the same vein, stronger correlation must be demonstrated between increasing public access to information and the ways in which transparency can improve government performance (e.g. through enhanced revenue collection, reduced spending) as well as to market-based incentive schemes (e.g. seafood certifications and sourcing policies, sectoral investments and trade agreements).

Secondly, transparency is still often misperceived as a notion with which governments can voluntarily choose to engage. The provision of information on a country's marine fisheries sector is, however, increasingly becoming a legal requirement for governments, stemming e.g. from Freedom of Information laws. This implies that the public have

a right to obtain environmental information (including on their country's fisheries sector) with only limited, explicitly defined exceptions arising from confidentiality claims and security matters.

The importance of access to government information is also emphasised in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Target 16.10 of the SDGs calls on all states to adopt legislation or policies guaranteeing the right to information. This is essential for both the achievement of Goal 16, but also as an enabler for achieving other SDGs.

Yet there are clearly still many actors who benefit from a lack of transparency. It needs to

be acknowledged that if there were not such flagrant violations of good practices in fisheries management, there would be no need to insist upon transparency! Which means that there is still a lot to do. The FiTI is therefore working not only with governments to increase the public availability of fisheries management information but also with non-governmental partners to promote an enabling environment that demands, understands, utilises and incentivises online government transparency.

Marine resources belong to everyone, and transparency is an essential first step in ensuring that our ocean and fisheries remain a source of income, sustenance, recreation and deep wonder for generations and years to come. For

this, an immediate, global, and collective effort is needed. As Seychelles' Minister of Fisheries and the Blue Economy, Jean-François Ferrari, stated in his opening remarks at the launch of the first ever FiTI Report: "[The Fisheries Transparency Initiative] is a tool for future development, and it must be our guiding principle to share all data and information on resources with all stakeholders."

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“ We have nothing to hide, but everything to share ”

Why does it make sense for a fishing nation to support the Fisheries Transparency Initiative? Insights from one of the first candidates.

Mr Michaud, the Republic of Seychelles has been a FiTI Candidate country since April 2020 and the first to submit a Transparency Report. Why did your country decide to join the Initiative?

With an Economic Exclusive Zone of 1,365 square kilometres and a land mass of only 454 square kilometres, Seychelles is an oceanic state, and all its activities revolve around the ocean. It now fully focuses on the development of ocean-based activities, essentially tourism and fisheries. Tourism and fisheries are the two main pillars of the Seychelles economy and they have to be sustainable. Marine fisheries are a key contributor to the social, economic and cultural fabric of Seychelles. Good governance is essential and for this industry to prosper there needs to be full participation from all stakeholders and not just government. Furthermore, transparency and participation are some of the key principles of

the Blue Economy which government is actively promoting.

The country's decision to become a FiTI Candidate country was taken with the full support of the then Seychelles president and other stakeholders. Seychelles' main objective to become FiTI-compliant was to use the initiative to provide the Seychelles' government with clear procedural guidelines for gathering, verifying and disclosing relevant information on fisheries. It is expected that this will benefit all the fisheries industry – industrial, semi-industrial and artisanal – as well as civil society and investors helping Seychelles to progress as one of the leaders in sustainable fisheries management internationally.



Philippe Michaud is presently Consultant to the Ministry of Fisheries and the Blue Economy of the Seychelles. A graduate from the London School of Economics, Michaud was CEO of the Seychelles Fishing Authority and later Technical Adviser to the Ministry of Fisheries. He became Special Adviser for the Blue Economy when the Department was created in 2016 and is a member of the FiTI International Board.

Who are the stakeholders in the process?

The process started with a strong implication and support from government. It then invited and involved civil society and the industry. Initially the National Multi-Stakeholder Group, the NMSG, consisted of seven members but it was then extended to twelve to include representatives from the industry, youth and fishermen from Praslin, which is the second biggest island of Seychelles. Government representatives comprised a member of the Ministry of Fisheries and two members of the National Assembly, one of whom speaks for government and the other for the opposition. The civil society through the Citizens Engagement Platform, Seychelles, or CEPS, appointed two members from NGOs, and there is one member of Transparency Initiative Seychelles. The fisheries sector consists of one representative from the artisanal fishermen, one from industrial fishery and one from the fish processors. As chair of the NMSG, I have been stressing that each member has an alternate, as members can't always be present at all meetings.

Was it difficult to get all stakeholders on board? And are all interests really heard?

One big problem we have been facing is that the fishing sector, especially the local fishermen, have weak organisations representing them. This makes it difficult to select members of the different sub-sectors. Nevertheless, efforts are being made to better empower the artisanal fishermen. The meetings of the Na-

tional Multi-Stakeholder Group have, however, been conducted in a pleasant and constructive atmosphere. It is also very encouraging to see the members of the two political parties working in a bipartisan way.

What practical consequences will your participation have for the stakeholders in the fisheries sector?

The presentation of the first FiTI report has highlighted certain lack of information regarding the acquisition of data and certain gaps in reporting, especially by foreign licence holders. Identifying these gaps has contributed to the improvement of the next report, which is being prepared by the report compiler. The report was much appreciated by the parliamentarians when we had a working meeting with them. It enabled them to seek more clarifications in certain areas such as beneficial ownership. In future, more attention will be given to these issues. Civil society's interest in foreign fishing agreements has contributed towards making many of these agreements subsequently available to the public. It will lead to a better dialogue between all sides and reduce misinformation, so as to focus on the real issues benefiting the country.

Are benefits already being felt?

Benefits are resulting from interest being shown by a wide range of stakeholders in areas such as making the names of licence holders in the very lucrative sea cucumber fishery publicly available, comparing of the various foreign fishing agreements, the state of the various stocks, etc. The strong involvement of all the NMSG members contributed to coming up with 34 recommendations on how government can further strengthen the country's leadership in fisheries transparency. These range from creating an online vessel registry to publishing the results of recent stock assessments of fish in our waters. They have also generated an interest in the press and in the social media about the importance of the fishery and also the problems the industry is facing.

At the launch of the FiTI Report, the Minister of Fisheries and the Blue Economy, Jean-François Ferrari, did not hesitate to emphasise the significance of Seychelles' policy on fisheries: "This government has a clear vision to make Seychelles' fisheries the most transparent in the world. We have nothing to hide, we have everything to share."

Would you recommend other countries to follow your example?

A country's general credibility is greatly enhanced if it operates in a transparent way

The Seychelles' fisheries sector

The Seychelles' fisheries sector consists essentially of three sub-sectors: artisanal fishery, semi-industrial fishery and industrial tuna fishing.

Artisanal fishery plays a significant role in food security, employment and revenue earnings. It is exclusively reserved and practised by Seychellois small-scale fishermen targeting mainly demersal and semi-pelagic species. Fishing vessels range in length from 4 to 15 metres, and the main gear the fleet use includes hook and line, drop-lines, traps and nets. The estimated total catch recorded in 2016 amounted to 2,516 metric tons approximately 80 per cent of which was from line fishery and 16 per cent from trap fishery, while invertebrate fisheries contributed 4 per cent to the total artisanal catch. The fishery is mostly limited to the Mahé Plateau, an area of around 40,000 square kilometres. Certain stocks on the Plateau are overfished, and management measures are urgently required.

The **semi-industry**, which started in 1995, targets mainly tuna and swordfish. In 2018 there were 41 vessels ranging from 14 to 23 metres in length. These vessels operate mainly in the Seychelles Economic Exclusive Zone (EEZ) though a few operate at time on the high seas. In 2018, the reported catch was 1,228 metric tons. In recent years, this fishery has faced a number of challenges including limited export demand and debt repayment problems.

Sea cucumber fishery, which began in the early 1980s and has experienced rapid growth, is a further branch. By 1999, there

were already signs of population depletion, including lower volumes of high value species and fishermen having to dive deeper to maintain catch rates. Concerns were also raised about the sustainability of the fishery. In response to local depletions of some species, the Seychelles Fishery Ministry implemented some management measures in 1999.

Regarding **industrial tuna fishing**, Port Victoria, the archipelago's capital, is an important centre for the purse seine fishery which developed in the mid 1980s. Now, around 44 purse seiners are licenced to fish in Seychelles waters, the majority of them under a Sustainable Fisheries Partnership with the European Union. Thirteen others are Seychelles-flagged vessels, and the rest are from Mauritius and South Korea. This is by far the most important fishery in Seychelles and is a crucial source of foreign exchange, employment and revenue. The challenge is to ensure that the country benefits more from such fishery. Yellowfin tuna, which is the second most important tuna fishery after skipjack, is considered to be overfished.

Then there is the industrial long-line fishery, which is dominated by the South East Asian fleets and which focuses mainly on the high value frozen sashimi market. Seychelles has around 60 industrial longliners, which are flagged in Seychelles but are foreign owned. Very little catch is landed or transhipped in Seychelles, as these vessels very rarely call on ports. Apart from vessel registration, Vessel Monitoring Scheme (VMS) administrative fees and agents' fees, there are no significant contributions to the Seychelles economy.

with essential information such as fishery access agreements, revenue earned and status of fish stocks, etc., made publicly available. The fact that there is active participation between government and civil society representatives increases the confidence of investors, as they know that they will be operating in a country with a 'level playing field' where all governments provide information according to a coherent framework.

Stakeholders, such as governments and the commercial fishing industry, are increasingly aware that improvements in transparency are not only expected of them, but will be beneficial to their interests. By making fisheries

management more transparent and inclusive, the FiTI yields benefits for all stakeholders. In Seychelles, we also believe that the Initiative will greatly contribute towards the success of our Mahé Plateau Trap and Line Fishery Co-Management Plan, as all stakeholders know that they are considered as equal and essential partners and have access to credible information.

I believe that countries who seriously believe in good governance of the fisheries sector have every interest in joining FiTI.